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Iran: Factional Conflict and Political Instability ☐

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An Intelligence Assessment

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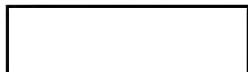
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Iran: The Narrowing Revolutionary Coalition

	Issues				
	Opposition to the Shah	Anti- Imperialism	Reform Guided by Islam	Restructuring the Economic and Social Order	Clerical Control
Revolutionary Clerics (Beheshti)					
Secular Revolutionaries (Bani-Sadr)					
Moderate Reformists (Bazargan)					
Leftists					
Secular Middle Class Liberals					
Inactive Senior Clergy					

The broad coalition which joined Khomeini in opposition to the Shah progressively narrows as new issues are defined.

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**Iran: Factional Conflict
and Political Instability (**

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Key Judgments

Factional infighting has significantly narrowed the politically diverse coalition that had joined in Khomeini's campaign against the Shah. The splintering of this coalition is a result of significant ideological differences as well as tactical moves by leading figures to gain power and weaken rivals.

Clerical leaders have taken more active roles in the new institutions of the Islamic Republic. These clerics are using the broad public support for Khomeini to regain the influence over government decisions the clergy lost during the secularizing rule of the Pahlavi dynasty.

Bani-Sadr and his associates, who share an ideology shaped by Western radicalism developed during years in exile in Europe and the United States, oppose clerical dominance and are on the defensive.

Other groups within the original coalition—including reformists associated with former Prime Minister Bazargan, middle class political liberals, leftists, and Khomeini's rival senior religious leaders—have been forced into political inactivity or opposition.

No senior religious leader who wants to play an active political role can command Khomeini's broad public support. Revolutionary clerical leaders are attempting to weaken opponents and institutionalize their authority before Khomeini dies. Their ability to maintain a dominant role after Khomeini's death is uncertain because their political strength apart from Khomeini is difficult to measure.

Moderate senior clerical leaders who have opposed Khomeini's active political role could support secular political leaders against the revolutionary clergy after Khomeini's death. Prolonged political instability is likely as leaders of these various factions of Khomeini's coalition attempt to acquire power.

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Consensus and Disunity

Ayatollah Khomeini has provided a source of mass support and legitimacy for a revolutionary coalition that includes several politically diverse groups. These groups agree on little more than their opposition to the Shah's regime and its close alliance with the United States. []

Most of the factions of the coalition are poorly organized and lack independent, stable bases of support. Many are no more than loose alliances of public figures competing with other groups and individuals among Khomeini's followers. Others, such as the leftist groups, have built on clandestine organizational bases established during the Shah's regime, but are now internally divided. []

The differences between the groups in the coalition and their lack of organized political support reflects the fragmentation of the opposition under the Shah's regime. Strict controls over political activity under the monarchy inhibited organization of a broad base for any of these groups. []

The divisions within the coalition have been obscured by the focus on broad themes such as the moral bankruptcy of the Pahlavi dynasty and the threat of US "imperialism." The large voter turnout last year to approve the establishment of an Islamic Republic reflected a broad consensus on the desirability of a state based on Islamic ideals. []

The splits within the coalition became apparent as soon as it had to deal with the practical problems of restoring order and administering the state. Intense struggles have developed among the factions over the distribution of power and over the making of "revolutionary" policies. Key points of dispute among Khomeini's clerical followers, Bani-Sadr's radicals, and Bazargan's moderates have been the activities of the revolutionary courts, the pressure to purge the bureaucracy, and proposals for radical restructuring of the economy. Much of the left has dropped out of the coalition over issues of press freedom, the right to participate in elections, and free access to university

campuses. This factional conflict is likely to mount as substantive issues are raised in the National Assembly. []

Clerical Control

The key issue contributing to the fragmentation of the coalition has been the effort by the clergy to institutionalize its power and weaken rival groups. The clergy's participation in government decisionmaking has expanded steadily since the revolution. []

Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Beheshti and other clerical leaders played a dominant role in the Revolutionary Council from its inception. The clergy's role as local leaders contributed to its influence with the numerous revolutionary committees set up after the revolution in cities, industries, the military, and the bureaucracy. In July 1979, then Prime Minister Bazargan brought a number of clerical leaders into government ministries in an attempt to increase coordination between the Council and the government. With the resignation of the Bazargan government in November 1979, the Revolutionary Council became the executive arm of the government, further extending the clergy's influence. []

The power struggle between Ayatollah Beheshti and Bani-Sadr reflects the clerical leaders' efforts to ensure their predominant influence over the government. The constitution approved by national referendum in December 1979 institutionalized Khomeini's role as religious leader and established clerical review of legislation. Bani-Sadr's victory in the presidential election in January, however, was a setback for the clergy. Bani-Sadr had opposed the formalization in the constitution of Khomeini's role, and after his election spoke of curbing the power of "fascist prelates." Bani-Sadr wants the Revolutionary Council, which continues to serve as the major channel for the clergy's influence, to be disbanded once the National Assembly approves a prime minister and cabinet. []

The Islamic Republican Party (IRP) is the political vehicle through which the clergy is trying to widen its influence and weaken Bani-Sadr. Ayatollahs Beheshti,

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Seyed Ali Khamenei, and Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani founded the party in February 1979. Beheshti is now the chairman of the party's Central Committee. Khamenei is the editor of the party's newspaper, *Islamic Republic*. []

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The party's performance during the presidential and parliamentary elections suggests that the IRP is an alliance of clerical leaders without a tightly knit organization. Influential religious leaders at the local level probably drum up support for IRP candidates and programs in exchange for access to and favors from the party's leaders. []

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Their ability to mobilize crowds of demonstrators has given the clergy an advantage over the other groups of the revolutionary coalition. Beheshti probably retains links to crowd organizers he used during the campaign against the Shah. The "hezbollahis" ("Party of God")—groups of Islamic militants who have closed down newspapers, attacked liberal demonstrations, and in April fought with leftists on Iranian university campuses—are reportedly led by a cleric, Hojjatollah Hadi Qaferi. Qaferi was elected to the National Assembly in the first round of elections on the IRP ticket. []

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Political moderates, including Bazargan's reformist wing of the coalition as well as the liberal upper middle class and some leftist groups have left the coalition in part because of the repressive tactics of the clerically organized militants. The remaining group within the coalition, Khomeini's rival senior religious leaders, have long disagreed with the active political role Khomeini and other clerics have played. These leaders have repeatedly avoided an open break with Khomeini, however, and are politically inactive. They fear that open conflict within the religious leadership could spark widespread unrest. []

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Revolutionary Change or Moderate Reform

The pace and extent of social and economic change have been another major issue contributing to a breakdown of the coalition. The clerical revolutionaries have generally avoided specific proposals on economic and social issues. In their occasional pronouncements they have been careful to follow the main lines of Khomeini's calls for social justice and national independence. In a meeting with US officials prior to

the Embassy takeover, Beheshti noted the revolutionary leadership's determination to remain in step with mass opinion despite the inevitable "mistakes" that would result. []

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The lay revolutionaries associated with Bani-Sadr favor a radical restructuring of the domestic and international economy. They focus on the social inequities that resulted from the Shah's policy of forced development, charging that the rapid push for modernization was in turn shaped by an oil export policy that served Western economic needs at the expense of Iran's interests. These ideas are a mixture of Islamic themes and Western radicalism, reflecting the years that members of this faction spent in Europe and the United States. []

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Bani-Sadr's proposals for reform are utopian. His extensive writings describe an "Islamic" economic order that would reduce inequalities of wealth and income. In theory, the new order would avoid both the competitive evils of capitalism and the accumulation of state power under socialism. An Islamic economy would emphasize agricultural self-sufficiency and industry based on Iranian resources rather than one that would have to rely on imported parts or foreign technicians. []

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The fall of the Bazargan government in November 1979 marked the defeat of the reformist wing of the revolutionary coalition. During Bazargan's nine months as Prime Minister, his government unsuccessfully attempted to restore order and restart the stalled economy. Bazargan failed because he was unable to gain control of the clergy-dominated revolutionary committees that urged radical changes in the economy, the military, and the bureaucracy. []

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Leaders of the two guerrilla groups, the People's Fedayeen and the Mujahedin, have continued to urge radical economic and social policies and to demand greater political freedom. These groups, however, have been put on the defensive by the attacks of Islamic militants. The Soviet-backed Communist party, the Tudeh, on the other hand, has avoided open confrontation with Khomeini's supporters. Tudeh leaders acknowledge Khomeini's leadership of the revolution and publicly support his goals. []

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The non-Communist leftist groups lost a major spokesman for their goals when Ayatollah Talaqani, the clerical leader of Tehran, died last year. Talaqani had long had links with leftist groups and was a major figure in bringing the left into the revolutionary coalition. Following his death, the primary issue for leftist leaders has been their right to participate in the political process. []

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Khomeini's Role

Khomeini's style of leadership has contributed to the splintering of the coalition. Since the revolution, Khomeini has frequently attacked leftists, liberal intellectuals, and others, charging that they are threats to the Islamic Republic. These vaguely worded attacks have provided justification for the repressive tactics of the clergy's militant followers. []

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Khomeini has apparently attempted to ensure that no one faction or leader gains preeminence. When one leader begins to gain strength, Khomeini shifts or withholds his backing. Bazargan's government collapsed when Khomeini refused to support the Prime Minister against the Revolutionary Council and the revolutionary committees. []

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Khomeini's style of issuing broad guidelines rather than specific directives adds to the confusion. Competing factions have used Khomeini's vague statements of policy to justify their own interpretations of his views. []

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After Khomeini Dies

The revolutionary clerics' increasingly dominant role among the factions of the revolutionary coalition is unlikely to survive Khomeini's death. No present clerical leader who is willing to replace Khomeini as religious head of state can command Khomeini's broad support. The senior ayatollahs in Iran disagree with the active role Khomeini has played. Younger, more active clerics like Beheshti or Khamenei are widely regarded as opportunists. They do not possess the moral legitimacy that is the basis of Khomeini's authority. []

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A brief period of harmony among the competing factions may follow Khomeini's death, with various leaders calling for unity in Khomeini's name. Prolonged political instability is likely over the longer

term, however, as various potential leaders make their bids for power. []

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Following Khomeini's death, the revolutionary clergy will become increasingly vulnerable to the charges of corruption and political tampering that are already being made. The clerical leaders are blamed for the quick trials and executions ordered by the revolutionary courts and the expropriatory "justice" of local revolutionary committees. The continuing disorder has led to an increase in crime. Economic disarray has frustrated and alienated the bazaar merchants, the principal economic supporters of the clergy. Continuing unemployment, inflation, and scarcity of some items contribute to the discontent. []

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The other factions will seek to take advantage of the resentment against the clergy and the repressive tactics of its militant supporters. Bani-Sadr, Bazargan, and other more moderate leaders may forge a temporary alliance against the revolutionary clergy. Although major ideological differences separate Bani-Sadr and Bazargan, Bani-Sadr's frustrations in moving ahead with his proposals might temper his economic radicalism. Bazargan's status as a respected elder statesman and the first Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic could lend legitimacy to a new coalition. These leaders would probably look to senior clerical leaders for support. The senior clergy has been unwilling to break with Khomeini, but it is unlikely to allow Beheshti or other radical clerics to assume Khomeini's role. []

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Even a temporary alliance between the leading secular politicians, if it received the support of senior clergy such as Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, could leave Beheshti with few options. Without Khomeini's support, Beheshti could no longer be sure of the organizational abilities of the lower level clergy. A secular alliance, on the other hand, might be able to call upon the government's security forces against Islamic militants. Beheshti's efforts to ensure clerical dominance of the institutions of the Islamic Republic before Khomeini dies reflect his awareness that support for the revolutionary clergy is based on its association with Khomeini. Without a firm grip on power after Khomeini's death, Beheshti may be forced to withdraw, leaving the revolutionary clerics without a leader. []

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Appendix

Khomeini and the
Political Uses of Islam

Khomeini effectively manipulated the themes of Shia Islam during the revolution against the Shah. These themes, however, have been less useful for restoring order and governing a modern state. In practical political terms, Khomeini's interpretations of Shia doctrine require clerical leaders who both can command broad support comparable to Khomeini's and are willing to take an active political role. None of the present clerical leaders in Iran meet both requirements. The secular politicians, on the other hand, having gained office on the basis of association with Khomeini, have been unable to organize their own stable bases of support. []

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The popular religious expressions, institutions, and doctrines of Iranian Shiism contributed to the revolution in several ways. The highly emotional popular expressions of Shia Islam focus on protest against injustice. The clergy and the mosques, despite losses to the monarchy, could still organize this dissent and direct it against the Shah. Iranian Shia doctrine denies the legitimacy of the secular state. There is broad agreement among adherents of Shiism that legitimate rule belongs to the 12th of the successors to Mohammad recognized by Iranian Shias. They believe the 12th Imam, who died in the ninth century, is in occultation but will return to establish just rule. A secular state that becomes autocratic allows religious leaders to invoke the central theme of Shia faith and practice, the martyrdom of one of the early Imams at the hands of an illegitimate ruler. []

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Khomeini's view that Shia Islam provides a basis for religious leadership of the state in the absence of the 12th Imam has no historical precedent, however, and is not widely accepted. Khomeini's calls for popular demonstrations of unity have had far less emotional appeal than his calls for popular protest during the revolution. The mosques that served as centers of opposition during the revolution could not be transformed into institutions for administering the state. Khomeini's interpretations of Shia doctrine to justify

religious leadership—the concept of “velayat-eh-faqih” or rule by a religious jurisprudent established in the constitution—have long been the subject of debate by groups that nevertheless joined in the revolutionary coalition. []

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Khomeini's book, *Islamic Government*, is not a blueprint for an Islamic state, as some press reports indicate. The work is a lengthy, detailed effort by Khomeini to justify on the basis of doctrine his radical view that the state must be under the rule of a religious leader. Khomeini draws on several broadly accepted ideas in this work, but combines them in a new way that challenges the assumptions of the traditional Iranian clerical leadership and other groups. []

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Khomeini's political thought begins with the idea of “ummah,” Mohammad's leadership of a community that contained no separation of church and state. The second key element in Khomeini's thought is “ijtihad,” the concept of authoritative legal interpretation of scripture. In Iranian Shiism, the right of “ijtihad” is granted to pious scholars (“mujtaheds”). The outcome of an 18th century debate sharply increased the power of the clergy in Iran by establishing that each generation must have living sources of this authoritative interpretation. Living leaders rather than past writings would be the source of authoritative rulings. The most senior mujtaheds would be the “sources of emulation” (“marja'eh taqlid”) for society, or the focus of the allegiance for Shias on all matters of social conduct. The social leadership acquired by the clergy through these ideas of the secular relevance of Islam and the authority of the mujtaheds has long had popular support in Iran. []

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To these widely accepted principles, Khomeini adds two less conventional views. The first is the injunction in the *Quran* to “command the good and forbid the evil.” Khomeini interprets this as part of a political doctrine. He views his leadership role as defining

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boundaries of good and evil for society. More traditional Iranian clerical leaders apparently view this Quranic injunction primarily as a moral imperative for the individual. Khomeini's greatest conflict with the traditional clerical leaders, however, is in his view of the doctrine of "valayat" or "rule." Khomeini refers to a verse in the *Quran*, "O ye who believe, obey Allah, obey the Prophet and those in authority among you." He asserts that "those in authority among you" refers to the Imams, the legitimate successors to Mohammad, and in their absence, to the religious jurists, the mujtaheds. The most senior mujtaheds, the marja'eh taqlid, are thus charged both with explicating belief and doctrine and with establishing an Islamic political system. []

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The active political role of the marja'eh taqlid has long been a topic of debate in Iranian Shiism. Khomeini's assertion that the state should be under the leadership of the marja'eh taqlid is a radical view. Khomeini's clerical followers like Beheshti are revolutionaries in Islamic terms as well as in politics. The senior Iranian clergy and most of its predecessors acquiesced in rule by a secular leader as long as order and tranquility were served, although they supported the principle of clerical review of legislation. They viewed the role of the marja'eh taqlid in more limited, social terms. Bani-Sadr, Bazargan, and the leaders of other factions in the revolutionary coalition opposed the formalization in the constitution of Khomeini's concept of religious leadership. During the debates on the political aspects of Islam held as early as the Islamic reform movement of 1959 to 1963, Bazargan clearly stated that reform should be guided by Islam, but the clergy should not become directly involved in politics. []

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Khomeini's dominant position as the focus for popular loyalty and as the symbol of popular aspirations for social justice has contributed to the triumph of his radical view. Lay leaders of factions of the coalition have gained office by association with Khomeini. They have been unable to organize mass support for their view of a state guided by Islam but led by secular politicians. The other senior clerical leaders—such as Shariat-Madari—disagree with Khomeini's radical views. They could command mass support after Khomeini's death, but reject the role he has played. Khomeini's clerical followers, on the other hand, accept his views, but lack his broad support. The debate over clerical leadership of the state is likely to emerge as a major factor in the political instability following Khomeini's death. []

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